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Native Alaska, Under Threat

By CALLAN J. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF

PARK CITY, Utah — I TRAVEL the world on the professional ski and snowboard circuit, but I grew up in a place most will never know firsthand. I was raised in Aleknagik, Alaska — an indigenous Yupik Eskimo village 400 air miles from the nearest chairlift and accessible only by boat and plane. It's one of the most remote places in North America.

This area is gaining attention as the proposed location of the [Pebble Mine](#), which could end up as the largest open-pit mine in North America and threaten thousands of acres of pristine watershed and the spawning grounds of the largest wild sockeye salmon run on the planet.

In recent years, an average of 37 million sockeye have returned every year to Bristol Bay, home to nearly half the sockeye in the world, supporting both commercial and subsistence fishing. Salmon are the economic backbone for Bristol Bay's isolated bush communities. About 12,000 people work full or part time harvesting and processing the bay's sustainable salmon.

My indigenous heritage is Yupik/Inupiat Eskimo. I was raised in an environment centered on salmon. Fishing is what every family does. It is who we are. I spent my summers on the back deck of family fishing boats working multiple fisheries. The boats and fish camps are maintained by generations of families harvesting salmon not only for income, but also for food.

I remember long days of processing hundreds of pounds of salmon, setting nets, cleaning and filleting, filling tubs of salt brine, putting fresh water in clean white buckets and hanging neat rows to dry and smoke. Enjoying the bounty over the winter, my family would affectionately praise me for my hard work and contribution to our food. When I was 8, I went into business for myself, lugging a little cooler around the boatyard, selling sodas to the fishermen, welders, port engineers and fabricators.

As a child, I had no idea what magic this life was — it was just the way we did things. It's the way many Alaska Natives live — through self-reliance and hard work to harvest the many gifts of the land and sea.

This subsistence way of life that is thousands of years old is threatened by the plans of a British and Canadian mining partnership to dig a huge mine in the heart of our productive, healthy watershed.

People in Bristol Bay understand how vital our renewable resources are and that risking our lands, waters and fish for a short-term mega-mine like Pebble is a terrible idea. Eighty-one percent of Native shareholders in the Bristol Bay Native Corporation — composed of more than 9,000 Native Alaskans with ancestral ties to the Bristol Bay region — opposed the mine in a 2011 survey. And that's despite the promises of jobs and continuing efforts by the Pebble Partnership, the proponent of the mine, to buy support through grants and giveaways to communities and hundreds of millions spent to develop the mine. This issue is deeply felt in the bay, and around Alaska, where, according to a 2011 survey commissioned by the Natural Resources Defense Council, 68 percent said no to Pebble — in a state known for its love of resource extraction.

We know from a recent assessment by the Environmental Protection Agency (the deadline for public comments on the report is Sunday) that Bristol Bay is no place for a gigantic mine. The agency found that, depending on how much of Pebble's copper, gold and molybdenum are unearthed, as much as 90 miles of streams and up to 4,800 acres of wetlands could be destroyed. And that is the very-best-case scenario — without any disaster involving a breach of the 700-foot-tall earthen tailings dams that are supposed to hold billions of tons of toxic mine waste forever in a wet, sensitive and seismically active area.

It's truly alarming when Pebble's chief executive officer, John Shively, blithely says that, sure, the mine will damage some salmon habitat, but the company will just build "comparable" habitat nearby. Or when he says that salmon fishing is not the economic "answer for people who live out in southwest Alaska." His comments show a lack of understanding of salmon life cycles, habitat and ecosystems — not to mention the people of Bristol Bay. And it should worry us all that Mr. Shively is already saying that the government or someone else may have to handle the messy aftermath of mining if "we're not available to work on closure."

The E.P.A. can block the mine under the Clean Water Act — something our government has done rarely and judiciously. If ever there were a case for using this power, Bristol Bay is the place, with a fishery of global scale and value, and Native communities dependent upon salmon.

Callan J. Chythlook-Sifsof was a member of the United States snowboarding team in the 2010 Winter Olympics and is training for the 2014 Winter Olympics.

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